



Written by
Martin Lochman

FIVE STAGES OF HUBRIS



(FIRST DRAFT, 14th FEBRUARY 2029)

Dear Mrs Sciberras,

Allow me to begin by stating that all I ever wanted was to make our country a better place to live. Unlike plenty of my peers who went into science to make a name for themselves or revel in the theory, my ultimate objective has always been to develop practical, easily applicable solutions to problems. And let's face it, Malta suffers from plenty – from chronic overpopulation coupled with collapsing infrastructure and short-sighted development policies, to climatic changes with increasingly more devastating effects on the local environment.

I was never one to complain, but when push came to shove, everyone just stuck their heads in the sand and pretended the hornet issue didn't concern them. I wasn't about to lump it in with the rest of this country's issues, nor was I ever going to be among those who would flee the country the first

chance they got, renouncing everything that tied them to it. I vowed to do everything in my power to help the island and my fellow countrymen, as any true Maltese should.

You might understand this as an excuse, a desperate attempt at justifying this inexplicable accident, and I suppose you have every right to do so. However, I need you to know where I am coming from and |

(SECOND DRAFT, 23rd FEBRUARY 2029)

Dear Mrs Sciberras,

I believe the best way to begin this is by explaining the nature of my work and what I set out to achieve. I am – I was – the head of a small research group at the Department of Applied Entomology, the youngest postdoctoral fellow at the University (though I understand that you may deem that hardly relevant). We were investigating the Oriental hornet (*Vespa orientalis*), specifically the methods that could

be used to drastically reduce their numbers in Malta.

I am sure you are aware of the profound negative impact the species, albeit native to the Archipelago, has had on the environment, especially in the last decade when their population exploded as a result of uncontrolled urbanisation and its accompanying symptoms. Destroyed bee colonies, reduced agricultural production, damaged infrastructure – these are only a few highlights that made the papers. The hornets' true achievement, in the negative sense of the word, was the irreversible, irreparable change to the local ecological landscape.

We considered different options, from the Sterile Insect Technique to growth inhibitors, but I wanted a solution that would have a more immediate and tangible effect. I felt we were racing against time and soon there wouldn't be anything anyone could do to stop the situation from spiralling out of control.

You can therefore imagine my

excitement when the answer finally presented itself – partly a happy combination of the right factors, partly the result of my unwillingness to let go of what everyone else dismissed as a dead end: pheromones. Though the hornets communicate primarily through sound vibrations, they are as susceptible to chemical cues as virtually all representatives of the insect world, and that fact turned out to be the key. In a nutshell, what we did was create a synthetic pheromone that turned the species' innate aggression inward.

We made them hunt and kill each other |

(THIRD DRAFT, 28th FEBRUARY 2029)

Dear Mrs Sciberras,

I imagine that by now, you have the full story. The conventional mass media as well as the social networks have done an excellent job of giving you the minute details of my life and work and painting me as the worst human being to ever walk the Earth. Some cold-hearted scientist with delusions of grandeur and ambitions that could never be satisfied. I find it tragically amusing that in a country with a long, rich history of political corruption, rampant greed, and overt classism, where the law is reduced to a mere suggestion to be considered and discarded, someone whose only goal was to improve the dismal status quo can be so readily designated public enemy number one.

It's the era we live in: an era of instant gratification, foregone conclusions, and black-and-white narratives. But I digress. I need you to know that I never intended for anyone to get hurt, even if nobody believes it.

I admit that, while largely exaggerated and simplified, a few claims posited in the news do contain a grain of truth. Some of the test subjects did indeed exhibit aberrant behaviours during the trials, lingering in place or taking interest in their surroundings rather than the other hornets after being exposed to the pheromones, but these constituted a fraction of their total numbers – dismissing it as inconsequential was only logical.

And yes, the implementation phase was somewhat rushed; however, the initial results spoke for themselves. Within days, major colonies had collapsed with little to no collateral damage. Within a few weeks, the hornet population in Malta had been reduced by thirty percent – and those were only the conservative estimates!

You see, my solution worked *exactly* as it should have |

(FOURTH DRAFT, 4th MARCH 2029)

Dear Mrs Sciberras,

What happened to your daughter and the other children at Il-Farfett Childcare was a tragedy, there is no denying that. I cannot even begin to imagine what they must have felt when the swarm descended on them and their carers. I have seen the video more times than I can count – the prosecution made sure that I would have access to *all* damning evidence – and I can honestly say that there exists no worse fate.

I want to offer you my sincere apology for the part I played in the horrible event. I am well aware that my words are meaningless to you and your family, yet I must emphasise that none of us, not the members of my

team nor my superiors, could have foreseen it. We had expected a degree of adaptation – after all, the stress we induced in the hornet population was unparalleled; however, their newfound cooperation, hyper-aggression, and strategic behaviour were so far beyond our wildest thoughts that they never even occurred to us. It should have been impossible. This is not meant as an excuse but simply an explanation, an effort to |

(FIFTH DRAFT, 6th MARCH 2029)

Dear Mrs Sciberras,

I am truly sorry. I realise now that there is nothing I can say that would ease the pain and suffering you are feeling. No matter how hard I cling to justifications, the truth remains plain and simple: I was wrong. I made a mistake, and that mistake cost lives.

Even if I am ultimately convicted and sentenced, I will do everything in my power to eliminate the threat I created. The hornets' unprecedented adaptation has rendered them completely unpredictable; however, they are biologically still the same species, and surely therein lies the key to bringing them back under control.

I know my apology won't bring Julia or the others back. I know you can never forgive me, and I accept that. My only hope is that one day, you can find some small measure of peace.

I am sorry.

Kindest regards,
Dr Alex Azzopardi

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